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*Artificial Intelligence
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THE QUALITY OF THE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN THE STUDY OF ENGLISH OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract. The study presents the level of English-language competence of pedagogical students as part of their academic preparation. Foreign language competence is ranked among the major proficiencies of future teachers in Bulgaria. The criteria for language acquisition of the students are in accordance with the European Language Framework and these were used to establish the linguistic acquisition of the students at the end of their first academic year. The purpose of the executed study was to determine the quality of the academic preparation in English of students from the specialty Primary School Education with a Foreign Language at the Faculty of Education at Trakia University. The results of a specially designed and evaluated test revealed that the students had difficulty with the correct usage of the English tense system but excelled at the reading and listening comprehension tasks. The findings showed considerable advance in academic performance of the students throughout their first year at university.

Keywords: university education; academic success; linguistic competence

Introduction: the context for pedagogical language competence

The preparation of future educators in Bulgaria places a significant emphasis on foreign language competence, particularly English, which is widely recognized as the global language of communication. The strategic imperative of foreign language competence for Bulgarian educators ranks English proficiency among the major proficiencies required of teaching professionals in the contemporary European educational context. The quality of language preparation of the future primary-school teachers is of utmost importance, as they not only are expected to teach content but also serve as accurate linguistic models for young learners. This study specifically investigates the academic preparation in English of first-year students from the specialty “Primary School Education with a Foreign Language” at the Faculty of Education at Trakia University in Stara Zagora, Bulgaria. The students from that specialty study English during the eight semesters in order to get their Bachelor’s

degree. Their studies involve a multifaceted preparation covering psychology, pedagogy, didactics, methodology of English-language teaching, etc. Ranking above all subjects that need to be mastered for their future profession is the linguistic competence of the target language at a very advanced level. The professional role of the graduates who eventually are qualified as primary school teachers requires a communicative ability and a high degree of productive linguistic accuracy. If a teacher demonstrates systematic grammatical inaccuracies, there is an inherent risk that these errors will be transmitted to, and subsequently fossilized in their young pupils. Therefore, determining the precise quality of their English performance is a critical endeavor in safeguarding national educational standards and the professional credibility of the next generation of Bulgarian primary educators. The preliminary research revealed that teaching a foreign language at universities despite all claims is not quite well organized. Foreign languages are started at a beginner level without taking into account whether the student has studied the language at the high school level or in some other formal or informal way. Thus, students who have studied at a language school cannot continue to develop their knowledge of the second language and start studying it from scratch while at the same time there are colleagues in their groups who have none knowledge of the studied language at all.

2. Literature review and discussion

In alignment with the European educational frames, the assessment of language acquisition is rigorously standardized by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, note 1), established by the Council of Europe and providing a unified, six-level scale (A1 to C2) used widely across Europe and internationally to grade and compare language proficiency. For primary school teachers of English within the European Union, national guidelines typically mandate a minimum professional language proficiency. While requirements vary slightly by country, it is generally considered that class teachers responsible for English instruction should possess specific language competences up to at least level B1 of the CEFR. Given the specialty's focus on English as a foreign language component, the explicit use of the so-set criteria in this study allows for an objective and comparable evaluation of the students' academic achievements.

Evidence from previous studies suggests that students with lower proficiency in the foreign language not only have lower academic achievements but tend to be less engaged in university classes and are also at risk of dropping out (Othman et al., 2021). The exploration of the relationship between literacy in the mother language, foreign-language fluency and learning engagement among first-year undergraduate students has been a matter of interest for a multitude of scientists in the country (Siderova, 2020; Gotseva, 2022). 'According to the content and goals of the educational process, different types of linguistic analysis are applied at different

levels: *phonetic, morphemic, word-formation, morphological, lexical, syntactic, text-linguistic*, etc. The competencies mastered for carrying out linguistic analysis by student teachers can find their analogous transfer in university foreign language training' [transl. from Bulgarian] (Siderova, 2020, p. 61).

The theoretical perspectives on the acquisition of a foreign language and the L1 transfer (the knowledge of the native Bulgarian language) infer an interplay of accuracy, fluency and a receptive-productive gap. The Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory distinguishes sharply between fluency – the ability to communicate smoothly and meaningfully – and accuracy – the correct production of grammatical forms. Research consistently demonstrates that receptive skills, namely reading and listening, are fundamentally driven by exposure to language. The greater the comprehensible input a learner receives through reading and listening, the more readily they internalize linguistic information without which they cannot effectively produce language.

Over the last decades, research in learning engagement has been perceived as crucial in understanding student learning and development (Radloff et al., 2010; Andrew, 2017). Empirical studies across the world indicate that English fluency plays a significant role for students to complete their studies in educational institutions, particularly students whose first language is not English (Li et al., 2010; Taguchi, 2014). Taguchi (Taguchi 2014) examined how English fluency level affects students' academic achievement by utilizing both self-reported questionnaire and standardized tests. Based on the results, a statistically significant correlation was reported between language scores and entry requirements. Studies have also shown the need for students to have sufficient English fluency in order to be able to understand the feedback given by the instructors. While these studies indicate the effects of English fluency on students' interactions with instructors and co-students, there is still a need to analyze whether their self-perceived fluency in the English language affects their overall learning engagement. In university settings where lectures, activities and assignments are all predominantly given in English, investigating the relationship between English language fluency and engagement would be beneficial in the Bulgarian academic context where English teaching is a comparatively new development and the quality of teacher professionalism needs to be guaranteed by the university preparation. Over the last decades, research in learning engagement has been perceived as crucial in understanding student learning and development (Radloff et al., 2010). The term "engagement" was understood as involvement or the time and quality of effort students put into their learning (Astin, 1999; Kahu, 2013) in order to attain desired gains and academic outcomes (Barkley et al. 2020). It has been proven that an engaging learning environment, especially in the classroom, has strong associations with positive learning results (Carini et al., 2006; Kahu, 2011). In education, factors such as globalization and internalization of education, as well as the desire to compete internationally, have given rise

to the growth of the English language in higher education worldwide (Gill et al., 2013). Therefore, learning engagement might be affected by the students' English fluency, which impacts their academic performance. Weak English fluency level is perceived as one of the reasons why students are not actively involved in class and feel isolated, frustrated and even fearful and anxious. These findings indicate that English fluency can directly affect learning engagement through its impact on other factors such as socio-cultural involvement and psychological factors.

3. Research methods and results

The research methods used in the pedagogical study were 2 diagnostic tests and a survey in the form of a questionnaire aimed to evaluate the reflective and psychological dimensions standing behind the educational process. The study context of the pedagogical program at the Faculty of Education at Trakia University focuses on students pursuing a Bachelor's degree in Primary School Education with a Foreign Language. This full-time program spans eight semesters and the training model emphasizes an intensive preparation covering essential areas of professional competence, including psychology, pedagogy and didactics. The curriculum is characterized by an emphasis on broad theoretical knowledge combined with practical school experience which provides a fertile ground for self-reflection and studying the development of integrated professional competencies, including specialized language use.

3.1. Analysis of the first empirical instrument – the diagnostic linguistic tests

The quantitative scientific tools used for collecting the empirical data in the current study were the linguistic tests used to measure the academic achievements of the students in English. This measurement instrument of the research methodology performed through a diagnostic test aimed to evaluate the students' academic achievements in the English language and was executed two times – at the beginning of the academic year and towards the end of the students' first year at university. A strong correlation was confirmed between the understanding of the performed task and the teaching method and plan that stood behind it. The assessment instrument was aimed to certify the tested students in the context of the CEFR criteria. The core data for the analysis was generated by a specially designed and evaluated test administered to students at the conclusion of their first academic year. The criteria for language acquisition applied in the assessment were explicitly aligned with the above stated descriptive standards of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The design of the instrument, having successfully segregated student performance into high receptive scores (reading and listening) and low grammatical accuracy scores (tense usage), confirms its high discriminatory power. The table below illustrates the levels of success rate as defined above in the article. It shows how the percentage of correct answers maps to the High Success Rate (HSR), Average Success Rate (ASR), and Low Success Rate (LSR) categories.

The segmented percentage ranges are as follows:

- Low Success Rate (LSR): for results below 50% correct answers (from 0% up to, but not including, 50%).
- Average Success Rate (ASR): for results from 50% to 79% correct answers.
- High Success Rate (HSR): for test tasks solved with 80% to 100% correct answers.

In the case under consideration, the number of registered points from each student corresponds to the respective percentage of success.

Table 1. Segmented percentage ranges corresponding to the achievement levels

Levels of success	Description
High success rate (HSR)	80 to 100% correct answers
Average success rate (ASR)	50 to 79% correct answers
Low success rate (LSR)	Results below 50%

The evaluation of the academic achievements of students at the beginning and the end of their first academic year, respectively, confirmed the predicted enhancement of their linguistic proficiency as the following two charts demonstrate (Figure 1 and Figure 2):

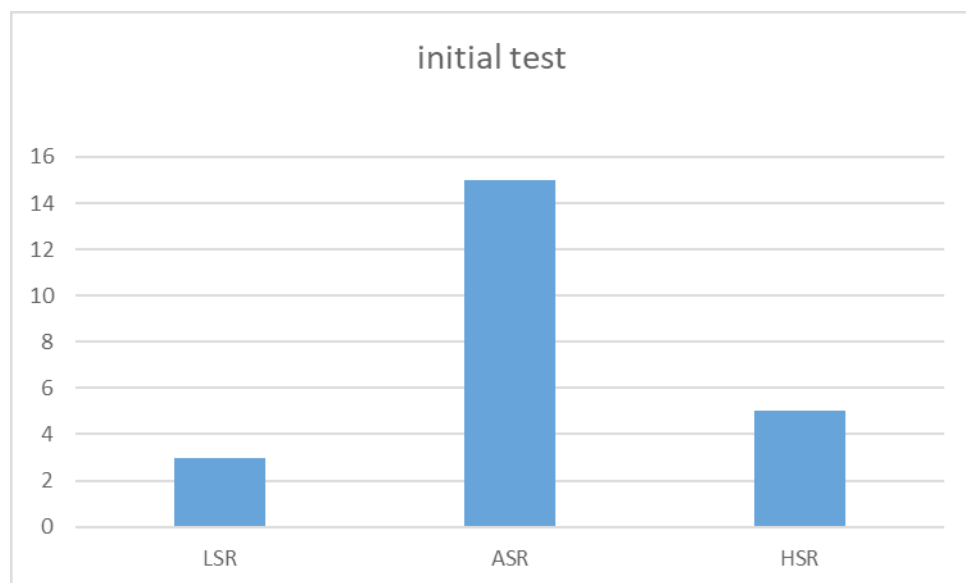


Figure 1. Results from the initial test

Figure 1 presents the results of the students from the entrance and test in General English. In the initial test, three students scored below 50% and one was at the 50% barrier. The average score from Test 1 was 64%, and the majority of participants scored between 50 and 79% (15 students), which corresponds to the average success. Five students registered high success rates.

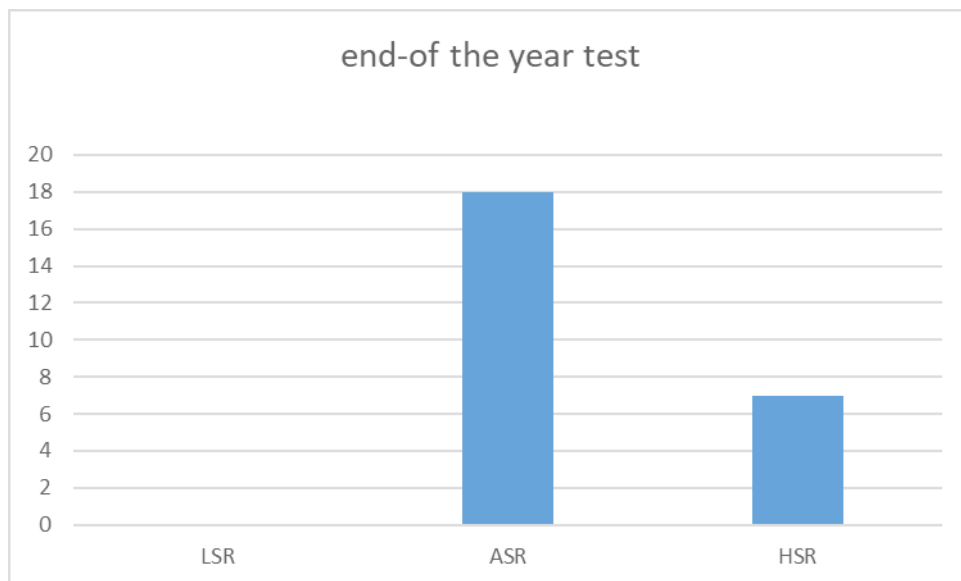


Figure 2. Results from the final test

At the end of the training, when taking Test 2 (average score 68%) there were no more students with low success rates. They have crossed the border from low to average success rates and the number of students with average success rates has increased from 15 to 18, while the number of students with high success rates is two more – 7.

The use of CEFR mapping allows the assessment results to be placed on the internationally recognized six-point scale. This approach ensures that the skills and knowledge gaps identified through the non-standardized test are genuine representation of the students' differential development across key language competencies at the threshold of their pedagogical training. When comparing the results at the beginning and end of the experimental training, a tendency towards increasing success rates was established, although with a small difference. The sustainability of this tendency in numbers is as follows: in 13 cases up to 5%, and in 6 of the cases with over 5%. Two students registered the same result on both tests

and only one – a weaker result. The small percentage of increased success rates with some students can be explained by the short period of application of the new methods and technologies – only a few months, while the predominance of their fellow-students have attended years or in some cases decades of language courses.

For the statistical processing of the test results at the beginning and end of the conducted experimental English language training, in order to establish the effectiveness of training, the main characteristic of which is the democratization of the student-learning content, student-lesson and student-teacher relationships, the *Wilcoxon criterion* was used. It belongs to the non-parametric methods, requires easy-to-implement procedures and provides sufficient certainty in formulating the relevant conclusions. It was established that the difference in the students' results between the beginning and the end of the training process in terms of increasing the success rate in English is due to the innovative methodology applied by the university teacher.

The tests contain tasks aimed to evaluate the development of the students' 3 of the main language skills throughout the year – writing, reading and listening. The reading and listening comprehension check exercises were of the typical type: "true or false", multiple choice, "fill in the missing word", etc. The Use of English section aimed to establish the ability of the students to identify grammar tenses and the correct auxiliary verb, as well as to be able to ask questions and make negative forms according to the model which has been used in the English lesson during the year.

The questionnaire which was included in the survey had the additional objective to identify the relationship between students perceived English fluency level and their received academic achievement results in relation to their learning engagement.

3.2. Analysis of the second empirical instrument – the answers to the survey questions

The survey which was used as secondary to the main instrument was performed through the use of a questionnaire consisting of 10 statements. Its purpose was to specifically describe the students' view on the English teacher's competency in understanding the learners, what teaching preparation means to them, how teaching and learning activities are conducted, what approaches and methods of language teaching are used in order to encourage the students to actualize their potential and last but not least – how learning evaluation and assessment are performed. The questionnaire also aimed to establish the development of the students' sense of achievement throughout their study at university. The results of the empirical data proved an increased understanding both of the English language and the profession of the teacher, specifically that of the English teacher. The third year students who have already attended lectures in Methodology of English-language teaching, CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), Linguistic characteristics of early foreign-language teaching and Morphology and Syntax of the English language,

show much greater awareness and reflection upon their learning. In their seminars in teaching methodology they themselves have already prepared English-language class activities and performed them before their fellow-students in simulated mini-lessons. They have already observed English lessons at primary schools in the town of Stara Zagora. The discussion on 'focus-on-form' from a theoretical perspective outlines the psycholinguistic rationale for a kind of instruction from a practical perspective by identifying the strategies that both students and teachers can use when dealing with the linguistic content. The conclusion that can be drawn is that by emphasizing the importance of including a focus-on-form in communicative language teaching language learning is facilitated. Thus the commonly held view that teachers should not 'interfere' when students are performing a communicative task is rejected. Some teacher educators have suggested that teachers should not intervene when students are performing a communicative task as this will detract them from the main purpose of such tasks, namely to develop fluency, as teachers' notes accompanying course books frequently instruct teachers to leave correction until the end of fluency activities (Hedge 2001, Scrivener 2005). If the objective is accuracy, then immediate correction is likely to be useful and if we put before ourselves the aim of fluency, then, logically, immediate correction that diverts from the flow of speaking is less appropriate.

Highlights of the results:

- Most of the students claim to have increased their knowledge of the language and the methodology of ELT.
- The majority of the respondents agree with the statement that they have a better understanding of the system of English, of the process of learning, the existence of learning styles, learning strategies, etc.
- 40 % of the respondents share their fear and frustration that they will not be able to become successful English teachers.

The feedback from the last section of the questionnaire in which the respondent students had to give free feedback on their first steps of teaching experience, contained such comments as: *"I never realized how stressful it is to be a teacher"*; *"It takes so much time to prepare a simple game!"*, *"I enjoyed very much the game in which we had to compete with the other team"*, *"I liked it that we had to step in the shoes of the students and teachers"*, *"I realized how important the clear instructions on the part of the teacher are"*. A crucial and contrasting finding emerged in the empirical instrument whose goal was to establish the affective domain behind the teaching and learning of a foreign language: a significant percentage of the respondents shared fear and frustration regarding their potential success as English teachers. This finding points toward a substantial self-efficacy gap. Despite acquiring advanced theoretical knowledge, the initial exposure to practical teaching roles generated high levels of performance anxiety. This fear aligns directly with documented in the scientific literature phenomenon known as Teacher Foreign Language Anxiety (TFLA, note

2), a specific type of performance anxiety triggered by self-doubt, concerns over language proficiency, classroom dynamics, and the fear of errors. Anxiety is a common psychological factor in educational settings that can interfere with a teacher's ability to plan lessons, deliver instruction, and effectively manage the classroom. When EFL teachers attempt to alleviate student anxiety, they may inadvertently experience their own performance anxiety, which subsequently impacts teaching behavior. The high prevalence of this professional fear (over 40%) suggests that while the curriculum excels in cognitive transfer, it must be augmented with mechanisms designed to explicitly address and manage pedagogical stress and build emotional resilience among pre-service teachers. Unaddressed TFLA can compromise the quality of teaching and negatively affect the teacher's enjoyment and overall well-being.

4. Summary and conclusions

The initial findings of this study revealed a significant discrepancy when assessed against the expected skill profiles. The data collected indicate that while students demonstrate excellence in receptive skills, their productive grammatical accuracy is notably weaker, suggesting an uneven linguistic profile at the end of their first year. This unevenness may indicate that while their comprehension meets or even surpasses the B1/B2 receptive standard, their ability to produce consistently accurate language, particularly in grammatical structures, may fall short of the required professional level, demanding specific pedagogical attention. The success of the students who took part in the experiment in comprehension tasks suggests that they have received the necessary linguistic input, leading to a strong foundation in language acquisition, or, it may as well be assumed, intuitive or unconscious competence.

This pattern, where comprehension outpaces production, can be interpreted through popular theoretical models such as the popular Krashen's Input Hypothesis, according to which language is acquired through understanding input. The high performance in receptive skills validates a strong acquisition process. However, the accompanying low performance in grammatical accuracy suggests that while the students have internalized enough language to understand meaning, they struggle to apply conscious, explicit grammatical knowledge (the language function) to "polish" their output. The discrepancy between the strong capacity to process language (receptive skills) and the weak capacity to structure it accurately (productive skills) is a classic manifestation of the acquisition-learning gap, highlighting the need for specific instruction to bridge this divide. The identified skill dichotomy necessitates a strategic realignment of the English language pedagogy within the teacher training program. The goal should be to maximize the benefit of the students' high receptive capacity while systematically addressing the deficit in productive grammatical accuracy, especially in the challenging domain of the English tense system. The study offers specific

justifications for the quantitative results, including a strong correlation between task understanding and the underlying teaching method.

5. Pedagogical implications and directions for future research

The primary objective of the hereto described study was to determine the quality of the academic preparation in English of pedagogical students at Trakia University. For a better representation, a further longitudinal research would ensure a deeper understanding and more profound solutions of the stated problems. The specially designed assessment revealed a pronounced skill dichotomy: excellence in reading and listening comprehension juxtaposed with significant difficulty in the correct usage of the English tense system. This finding necessitates a deep investigation into the linguistic and pedagogical causes of the established accuracy gaps. By analyzing this specific pattern of strength and weakness, this research could be used to inform curriculum development and implement targeted pedagogical interventions which ensure that future teachers achieve the holistic competence required for their demanding professional roles. A similar survey performed at the third year of the academic study (after the students have finished their course in methodology of foreign language teaching) would provide further insights of the professional preparation of the teachers-to-be.

NOTES

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